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ABSTRACT

Rational-emotive therapy (RET) holds that much of what we call the human "ego" has little or no legitimacy and, when conceived of and given a global rating (e.g., the individual gets rated as "worthwhile" or "worthless"), interferes with survival and happiness. Certain aspects of "ego" do have a verifiable existence and lead to beneficial results: people do seem to exist, or have aliveness, for a number of years, and they also have self-consciousness, or awareness of their existence. In this sense, they have uniqueness, ongoingness, and "ego." But what they usually call their "self" or "totality" or "personality" has a vague, almost indefinable quality, and they cannot legitimately give it a single meaningful rating--cannot label it as "good" or "bad." They may well have good or bad traits--characteristics that help or hinder them in their goals of survival and happiness--but they really have no "self" that "is" good or bad. To increase their health and happiness, RET theory and practice recommends that they'd better resist the tendency to rate their "self" or "essence" and had better rate only their deeds, traits, acts, characteristics, and performances. (Author)

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RET Abolishes Most of the Human Ego

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RET Abolishes Most of the Human Ego

The vast majority of systems of psychotherapy seem intent on--indeed, almost obsessed with--upholding, bolstering, and strengthening the human ego. This goes for such diverse and seemingly opposed systems as those of Freud (1963), Jung (1954), Adler (1974), Perls (1969), Berne (1964), Rogers (1961), and Branden (1971). Very few systems of personality change, such as that of Zen Buddhism (Suzuki, 1956), take the opposite stand and try to help humans surrender some aspect s of or abolish their egos; and these systems tend to have little popularity and to engender much dispute.

RET, rational-emotive therapy, constitutes one of the very few modern therapeutic schools which has taken something of a stand against what we normally call the ego for a good many years (Ellis, 1962), and that continues to take an even stronger stand in this direction as it grows in its theory and its applications (Ellis, 1973, 1974, 1975; Ellis and Harper, 1975). Let me try, in this paper, to outline quite precisely the up-to-date RET position and to explain why it attempts to abolish most of the human ego.

Legitimate Aspects of the Human Ego

RET first tries to define the various aspects of the human ego and to validate its "legitimate" aspects. It assumes that an individual's main goals or purposes include (1) remaining alive and healthy and (2) enjoying himself or herself--experiencing a good deal of happiness and relatively little pain or dissatisfaction. We may, of course, argue with these goals; and not everyone acccpets them as "good." But assuming that a person does value them, then he or she may have a valid "ego," "self," "self-consciousness," or "personality" which we may conceive of something along the following lines:

1. "I exist--have an ongoing aliveness that last approximately seventy-five years and that then apparently comes to an end, so that 'I' no longer exist."

2. "I exist separately, at least in part, from other humans, and can therefore conceive of myself as an individual in my 'own' right.

3. "I have different traits, at least in many of their details, from other humans, and consequently my 'I-ness' or my 'aliveness' has a certain kind of uniqueness. No other person in the entire world appears to have exactly the same traits as I have nor to equal 'me' or constitute the same entity as 'me.'"

4. "I have the ability to keep existing, if I choose to do so, for a certain number of years--to have an ongoing existence, and to have some degree of consistent traits as I continue to exist. In that sense,

I remain 'me' for a good number of years, even though my traits change in important respects."

5. "I have awareness or consciousness of my ongoingness, of my existence, of my behaviors, of my traits, and of various other aspects of my aliveness and experiencing. I can therefore say, 'I have self-consciousness.'"

6. "I have some power to predict and plan for my future existence or ongoingness, and to change some of my traits and behaviors in accordance with my basic values and goals. My 'rational behavior,' as Myles Friedman (1975) has pointed out, to a large extent consists of my ability to predict and plan for my future."

7. "Because of my 'self-consciousness' and my ability to predict and plan for my future, I can to a considerable degree change my present and future traits (and hence 'existence')--I can at least partially control 'myself.'"

8. "I similarly have the ability to remember, understand, and learn from my past and present experiences, and to use this remembering, understanding, and learning in the service of predicting and changing my future behavior."

9. "I can choose to discover what I like (enjoy) and dislike (dis-enjoy) and to try to arrange to experience more of what I like and less of what I dislike. I can also choose to survive or not to survive."

10. "I can choose to monitor or observe my thoughts, feelings, and actions to help myself survive and lead and more satisfying or more enjoyable existence."

11. "I can have confidence (believe that a high probability exists)

that I can remain alive and make myself relatively happy and free from pain."

12. "I can choose to act as a short-range hedonist who mainly goes for the pleasures of the moment and gives little consideration to those of the future, or as a long-range hedonist who considers both the pleasures of the moment and of the future and who strives to achieve a fair degree of both."

13. "I can choose to see myself as having worth or value for pragmatic reasons--because I will then tend to accept myself, to go for pleasures rather than pain, to survive better, and to feel good."

14. "I can choose to accept myself unconditionally--whether or not I do well or get approved by others. I can thereby refuse to rate 'myself,' 'my totality,' my 'personhood' at all, but merely rate my traits, deeds, acts, and performances--for the purposes of surviving and enjoying my life more, and not for the purposes of 'proving myself' or being 'egoistic' or showing that I have a 'better' or 'greater' value than others."

These, it seems to me, comprise some valid or legitimate aspects of the human "ego." Why legitimate? Because they seem to accord with empirical reality--state propositions that we can validate by the usual rules of scientific evidence. And because they appear to help people who subscribe to them to attain their usual basic values--again, the values of surviving and feeling happy rather than miserable. At the same time, some highly "invalid" or "illegitimate" aspects of the human "ego" or of self-rating exist. Such as these:

1. "I not only exist as a unique but as a special person. I rate as better than other people because of my outstanding traits."

2. "I have a superhuman rather than merely a human quality. I can do things that other people cannot possibly do and deserve to get deified for doing these things."

3. "If I do not have outstanding, special, or superhuman characteristics, I have a subhuman quality. Because I do not perform notably, I deserve to get devil-ified and damned."

4. "The universe especially and notably cares about me. It has a personal interest in me and wants to see me do remarkably well and to feel happy. [redacted]"

5. "I need the universe to care about me specially. If it does not, I rate as a lowly individual, cannot take care of myself, and must feel desperately miserable."

6. "Because I exist, I have to succeed in life and I must obtain love by all the people that I find significant."

7. "Because I exist, I must survive and continue a happy existence."

8. "Because I exist, I must exist forever, and have immortality."

9. "I equal my traits. If I have significant bad traits, I totally rate as bad, and if I have signficant good ones, I rate as a good person."

[redacted] 10. "I particularly equal my character traits. If I treat others well and therefore have a 'good character,' I rate as a good person; and if I treat others badly and therefore have a 'bad character,' [redacted] I have the essence of a bad person.

11. "I must, to accept and respect myself, prove I have real worth--prove that I have this worth because I have competence, outstandingness, and the approval of others."

12. "To have a happy existence, I must have--absolutely need--the things I really want."

These, then, constitute some of the legitimate and illegitimate aspects of ego or self-rating. And, just as the legitimate aspects lead to survival and happiness, the illegitimate ones tend to interfere with your survival and to create considerably less happiness than you otherwise would tend to achieve.

The self-rating aspects of ego, in other words, tend to do you in, to handicap you, to interfere with your satisfactions. They differ enormously from the self-individuating aspects of ego. The latter involve how or how well you exist. You remain alive as a distinct, different, unique individual because you have various traits and performances and because you enjoy their fruits. But you have "ego" in the sense of self-rating because you magically think in terms of upping or downing, deifying or devil-ifying yourself for how or how well you exist. Ironically, you think that rating yourself, your "ego," will help you live as a unique person and enjoy yourself. Well, it won't! For the most part it will let you surv. e, perhaps--but pretty miserably!

Doesn't ego-ism, self-rating, or self-esteem have any advantages? It certainly does--and therefore, probably, it survives in spite of its disadvantages. What advantages does it have? Well, several: It tends to motivate you to succeed

and to win others' approval. It gives you an interesting, preoccupying game of constantly comparing your deeds and your "self" to those of other people. It often helps you impress others--which has a practical value, in many instances. It may help preserve your life--as when you strive to make more money, for egoistic reasons, and aid your survival with this money. It, self-rating, serves as a very easy and comfortable position to fall into--since humans naturally, probably from a profound biological tendency, engage in it. It gives you some enormous pleasures--if and when you rate yourself as noble, great, or outstanding. It may motivate you to produce notable works of art, science, or invention. It enables you to feel superior to others. It sometimes enables you to feel god-like.

Egoism, obviously, has real advantages. To give up self-rating completely would amount to quite a sacrifice. We cannot justifiably say that it brings no gains, does not do social or individual good.

But what about its disadvantanges and hassles? Ah, enormous! Let me list just some of the more important reasons why rating yourself as either a good or a bad person had immense dangers and will almost always do you in:

1. To work well, self-rating requires arti-ordinary ability and talent, or virtual infallibility, on your part. For you can only accurately elevate your ego when you do well, and concomitantly depress it when you do poorly. What chance do you have of steadily or always doing well?

2. To have, in common parlance, a "fine" ego or "real self-esteem really requires above-averageness or oustandingness. Only if you have special

talent will you likely accept yourself and rate yourself highly. But, obviously, very few individuals can have unusual, genius-like ability. And will you reach that uncommon level? I doubt it!

3. Even if you have enormous talents and abilities, to accept yourself or esteem yourself consistently, in an ego-rating way, you have to display them virtually all the time. Any significant lapse, and you immediately down yourself. And then, when you do down yourself, you tend to lapse more. A truly vicious circle!

4. When you insist on rating yourself, you basically do so in order to impress others with your great "value" or "worth" as a human. But the need to impress others and to win their approval, and to view yourself as a "good person" because you get their approval, leads to an obsession that tends to pre-empt a large part of your life. You seek status instead of seeking joy. And you seek universal acceptance--which you certainly have virtually no chance of ever getting!

5. Even when you impress others, and supposedly gain "worth" that way, you tend to realize that you do so partly by acting and falsifying your talents. You consequently look upon yourself as a phony. Ironically, then, you down yourself for not impressing others; but you also down yourself for phonily impressing them!

6. When you rate yourself and succeed at giving yourself a superior rating, you delude yourself of having superiority over others. You may indeed have some superior traits; but you devoutly feel that you turn into a truly superior person--or semi-god. And that delusion runs your life and gives you

an artificial or false sense of "self-esteem."

7. When you insist on rating yourself as good or bad, you tend to focus on your defects, liabilities, and failings, for you feel certain that they make you into an R.P., or rotten person. By focusing on these defects, you accentuate them, often make them worse, interfere with changing them, and acquire a generalized negative view of yourself that almost always ends up in arrant self-deprecation.

8. When you have ego, or rate yourself, you have the philosophy that you must prove yourself as good; and since there always exists a good chance that you will not, you tend to remain underlyingly or overtly anxious practically all the time. In addition, you continually verge on depression, despair, and feelings of intense shame, guilt, and worthlessness.

9. When you preoccupyingly rate yourself, even if you succeed in earning a good rating you do so at the expense of obsessing yourself with success, achievement, attainment, and outstandingness. But this kind of concentration on success deflects you from the goal of trying to achieve happiness. For some of the most successful people, of course, remain abysmally miserable.

10. By the same token, in mightily striving for outstandingness, success, and superiority, you rarely stop to ask yourself, "What do I really want -- and want for myself?" So you fail to find what you really enjoy in life.

11. Ostensibly, your focusing on achieving greatness and superiority over others and thereby winning a high self-rating serves to help you do better in life. Actually, it helps you focus on your socalled worth and value rather than on your competency and happiness; and consequently you fail to achieve many things that you otherwise could. Because you have to prove your utter competence, you actually tend to make yourself less competent--and often to withdraw from competition entirely.

12. Although self-rating occasionally may help you pursue creative activities, it frequently has the opposite result. For, again, you get yourself so hung up on success and superiority that you uncreatively and obsessively-compulsively go for those goals rather than that of creative participation in art, music, science, invention, or other pursuits.

13. When you rate yourself you tend to feel self-centered rather than act problem-centered. Therefore, you do not try to solve many of the practical and important problems in life but largely focus on your own navel and the pseudoproblem of proving yourself instead of finding yourself.

14. Self-rating generally helps you feel abnormally self-conscious. Self-consciousness, or the knowledge that you have an ongoing quality and can enjoy or disenjoy yourself, serves as a great human advantage. But extreme self-consciousness, or continually spying on yourself to see how well you do and how well you can rate yourself for doing well, takes this good trait to an obnoxious extreme and interferes seriously with your happiness.

15. Self-rating encourages a great amount of prejudice. It consists of an overgeneralization, where you say that "Because one or more of my traits seem inadequate, I rate as a totally inadequate person." This means, in effect, that you feel prejudiced against yourself for some of your behavior. In doing this, you tend also to feel prejudiced against others for their poor behavior--or for what you consider their inferior traits. You thus can get yourself to feel bigoted about Blacks, Jews, Catholics, Italians, and various other individuals, some of whose traits you deplore.

16. Self-rating leads to necessitizing and compulsiveness. When you believe, "I must down myself when I have a crummy trait or set of performances," you concomitantly tend to feel, "I absolutely have to have good traits or performances," and you feel compelled to act in certain "good" ways--even when you have little chance of consistently doing so.

In these and many other ways attempting to have ego-strength or award yourself self-esteem leads to distinctly poor results: meaning, interferences with human life and happiness. To make matters even worse, as shown in recent RET writings, ego-ratings or self-ratings have an intrinsic illegitimacy about them, in that accurate or "true" self-ratings or global ratings seem virtually impossible to make (Ellis, 1973, 1974, 1975; Ellis and Harper, 1975). For a global or total rating of an individual involves the following kinds of contradictions and magical thinking:

1. As a person, you have almost innumerable traits--virtually all of which change from day to day or year to year. How can any single global rating of you, therefore, meaningfully apply to all of you--including your constantly changing traits?

2. You exist as an ongoing process --an individual who has a past, present, and future. Any rating of your you-ness, therefore, would apply only to "you" at a single point in time and hardly to your ongoingness.

3. To give a rating to you totally, we would have to rate all of your traits, deeds, acts, and performances, and sometimes add or multiply them. But these characteristics get valued differently in different cultures and at different times. And who can therefore legitimately rate or weight them, except in a given culture at a given time, and to a very limited degree?

4. If we did get a legitimate rating for every one of your past, present, and future traits, what kind of math would we employ to total them, divide by the number of traits, and get a valid global rating? Simple arithmetic ratings, with addition and subtraction? Algebraic ratings? Geometric ratings? Logarithmic ratings? What?

5. To rate [redacted] you totally and accurately, we would have to know all your characteristics, or at least the "important" ones, and include them in our total? How could we ever know them all? How, for example, could we know all your thoughts? Your emotions? Your "good" and "bad" deeds? Your accomplishments? [redacted] The state(s) of your physiology? How indeed?!

6. To say that you have no value or appear worthless involves several unprovable (and undisprovable) hypotheses: (1) that you have, innately, an essence of worthlessness; (2) that you never could possibly have any worth whatever; and (3) that you deserve damnation or eternal punishment for having the misfortune of worthlessness. Similarly, to say that you have great worth involves the unprovable hypotheses that (1) you just happen to have superior

worth; (2) you will always have it, no matter what you do; and (3) you deserve deification or eternal reward for having this boon of great worth. No empirical methods of confirming these magical hypotheses seem to exist.

7. When you posit worth or worthlessness, you almost inevitably get yourself into circular, empty thinking. If you see yourself as having intrinsic value, you will tend to see your traits as good, and will have a halo effect. Then you will falsely conclude that because you have these good characteristics, you have intrinsic value. Similarly, if you see yourself as having worthlessness, you will view your "good" traits as "bad," and "prove" your hypothesized lack of value.

8. You can practically or pragmatically hold that "I rate as good because I exist." But this stands as a tautological, unprovable hypothesis, in the same class with the equally unprovable (and undisprovable) statement, "I rate as bad because I exist." Assuming that you have intrinsic value because you remain alive will work and help you feel happier than if you assume the opposite. But philosophically, it remains an untenable proposition. You might just as well say, "I have worth because God loves me," or "I have no value because God (or the Devil) hates me." These assumptions cause you to feel and act in certain ways; but they appear essentially unverifiable.

For reasons such as those just outlined, we can make the following conclusions: (1) You do seem to exist, or have aliveness, for a number of years, and you also appear to have self-consciousness, or awareness of your existence. In this sense, you have a human uniqueness, ongoingness, or, if you will, ego. (2) But what you normally call your "self" or your "totality"

or your "personality" has a vague, almost indefinable quality; and you cannot legitimately give it a single meaningful rating or report card. You therefore may have good and bad traits--meaning, characteristics that help you or hinder you in your goals of survival and happiness and that enable you to live responsibly with others--but you or your "self" really "aren't" good or bad. (3) When you do give yourself a global rating, or have "ego" in the usual sense of that term, you can help yourself in various ways, but on the whole you almost always do much more harm than good, and you preoccupy yourself with rather foolish, side-tracking goals. Almost all of what we call emotional "disturbance" or neurotic "symptoms" directly or indirectly results from your globally rating yourself or other humans. (4) Therefore, you'd better resist the tendency to rate your "self" or your "essence" or your "totality" and had better stick with only rating your deeds, traits, acts, characteristics, and performances. In other words, you had better abolish most of what we normally call your human ego and retain those parts of it which you can empirically verify and fairly accurately define.

More positively, the two main solutions to the problem of self-rating or "ego" consist of an inelegant and an elegant answer: The inelegant solution involves your making an arbitrary but practical definition or statement about yourself: "I accept my self as good or rate myself as good because I exist." This proposition, though unverifiable, will tend to provide you with feelings of self-esteem or self-confidence and has many advantages and few disadvantages. It will almost always work; and will preclude your having feelings of self-denigration or worthlessness as

long as you live.

More elegantly, you can accept the proposition: "I do not have intrinsic worth or worthlessness, but merely aliveness. I'd better rate my traits and acts but not my totality or [redacted] 'self.' I fully accept myself, in the sense that I know I have aliveness and that I will probably live for a number of years, and I choose to [redacted] survive and live as happily as possible, and with minimum needless pain. I only require this knowledge and this choice--and no other kind of self-rating."

Rational-emotive therapy (RET) recommends this second, more [redacted] elegant solution, since it appears more honest, more empirical, and leads to fewer philosophical difficulties than the inelegant one. But for those who insist on a self-rating, it recommends that they [redacted] rate themselves as good merely because they live. That kind of "egoism" will get them into very little trouble!

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